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## **MURRAY DARLING ASSOCIATION BASIN PLAN FORUM – 18 FEBRUARY 2011**

# **COMMUNIQUE**

### **1. Introduction**

In response to the uncertainty and concern created in the community by the Guide to the proposed Basin Plan and the process by the Guide was delivered, the Murray Darling Association organised and hosted a Basin Plan forum in Dubbo on 18 February 2011. The aim was to maintain the current level of co-operation and information sharing amongst Murray-Darling Basin communities and to ensure that governments hear a united and consistent message from Basin councils.

The forum, *Developing a Basin Plan with a triple Bottom Line – Where to from here?* gave participants the opportunity to hear from regional development, government, social and economic research, mental health, banking, finance and Local Government speakers on progress with the Basin Plan.

About 140 Local Government and industry representatives from across the Murray-Darling Basin attended what many described as a positive and optimistic forum. Participants said that they felt that many of their concerns as outlined in responses to the Basin Plan Guide had been listened to.

Mr Tony Windsor MP, Chair of the Parliamentary Inquiry, and Federal Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, the Hon Tony Burke, attended the forum.

The forum was pleased to hear Minister Burke say: *“If there's one thing I want to deliver for communities it's certainty, and there was a whole lot of uncertainty that played to meetings that were held around the Basin at the end of last year.....There will end up being a document that I have to sign off on, that then needs to survive the parliament. The Guide was not that document.”*

The Association sees this as a very positive position and thanks Minister Burke for his reassurance and commitment.

Through an interactive process the Association has developed this communiqué which represents the views, concerns and values of the forum delegates.

The communiqué incorporates actions to ensure that governments are provided with responses and information to contribute to the decisions about the future social, economic and environmental issues of the Basin. They include:

### **1. Achieving a balance**

1.1 A balanced Basin Plan that achieves social, economic and environmental outcomes on an equitable basis, is the only acceptable outcome.

- 1.2 The social and economic security of Basin communities is fundamental to achieving beneficial environmental outcomes.
- 1.3 The social, environmental and economic outcomes of the Plan must be balanced and achievable.
- 1.4 Critical human needs and urban water supplies including provision for growth, must be provided for before determining any SDLs.

## **2. Provide security**

- 2.1 Basin communities want a Basin Plan that provides and delivers on achievable solutions and provides economic certainty for the future.

## **3. Water buyback**

- 3.1 The current ad hoc water buy backs should cease and be replaced with a more strategic approach to buying back water in specific irrigation districts and in consultation with the relevant irrigation authorities. Decisions regarding which water to buy back should be made not simply on price and peoples 'willingness' to sell, but also on other factors such as the intrinsic productivity of the land and the viability of the community affected.
- 3.2 When implementing strategic water buy back schemes, remaining irrigators should not be disadvantaged. The Environmental Water Holder and / or the appropriate Commonwealth department must pay their share of the fixed infrastructure charges.

## **4. Local Government**

- 4.1 Ensure that Local Government is consulted on at least a valley by valley basis, as an integral part of the plan development process, because they have to manage and support their communities into the future.
- 4.2 Make a commitment for Local Government to be given adequate funding to offset the loss of productivity and resultant loss of economic activity resulting from water buybacks from their communities, so that they can support the remaining community with sustainability and future security options.

## **5. Water efficiencies**

- 5.1 Recognise all on-going past and present water efficiencies and improvements (eg, Water For Rivers) that have already been made by irrigators and take these into account when deciding what the SDLs might be.

## **6. Existing strategies**

- 6.1 Ensure the Basin Plan takes into account the concessions already made by existing State water sharing plans.
- 6.2 The Basin Plan must be developed in the context of a vision for the Basin which integrates existing strategies that are already proven (eg. *The Living Murray*).

## **7. Community engagement**

- 7.1 Establish a consultation and engagement process that builds community involvement, and an understanding that fosters a sense of ownership within the community
- 7.2 Ensure that the language in any Basin Plan documents and engagement strategies is clear, jargon-free and understandable. Ensure that the "best available" science is understood by stakeholders.

- 7.3 As with Local Government, consult with each Basin catchment community to explore their own needs and processes – one size does not fit all!

## **8. Managing change**

- 8.1 Provide services to support individuals, businesses and communities in managing the inevitable changes associated with implementing the Basin Plan. Recognise that there will be major structural adjustment and this needs to be supported.
- 8.2 It is recommended that the work of Professor Margaret Alston and others in the field of mental health be taken into consideration.
- 8.3 Instill confidence for continued support from financial institutions and ongoing investment in the regions, including the investment already made by Basin communities.
- 8.4 Property rights must be preserved at all times during the Basin Plan development and implementation process.

## **9. Environmental flows**

- 9.1 Minimum environmental flows as decided by independent scientific research, must be honoured with an emphasis on using appropriate engineering solutions on an on-going basis, with minimal pain to Basin communities through buy backs of water.
- 9.2 Encourage and foster the development of innovative infrastructure solutions that are practical to manage environmental flows.
- 9.3 Before the SDLs are calculated, investigate the resilience of the environment in light of the environmental benefits of the recent natural floods (an audit should be done on the 18 icon sites).
- 9.4 The Basin Plan should include funding for the rehabilitation of river channels and riparian zone degradation - invest in a “whole-of- river” management approach.

## **10. Technology**

- 10.1 Make sure that the timing of technical innovation and improvements in irrigation infrastructure coincide with and complement other steps in the process.
- 10.2 Build on intellectual capital and experiences provided by previous innovations, eg. Snowy Mountains Hydro Scheme - and do not be restricted by lack of imagination.

## **11. Implementation**

- 11.1 The timing and implementation of the Basin Plan must be realistic, achievable and uniform between the States and the ACT.
- 11.2 Ensure that a robust auditing process is developed as a component of the Plan to monitor the impacts/benefits of the Plan in five and 10 years.
- 11.3 Communities want a Basin Plan to be developed and implemented that ensures long-term community gains, not short-term political gain!

*Murray Darling Association*

*March 2011*